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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000662

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/18/2017

TAGS: [PREL](#) [BA](#) [IR](#) [REGION](#)

SUBJECT: IRANIAN FM ASSURES BAHRAIN OF FULL RESPECT FOR
SOVEREIGNTY

REF: A. MANAMA 650 B. MANAMA 600

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe. Reason: 1.4 (B)(D)

11. (C) Summary. Iranian Foreign Minister Muttaqi, in a July 14 visit, gave Bahraini leaders an official assurance that Iran recognized Bahrain as a sovereign state and had no territorial claims on it, helping quiet a storm that had developed over a statement by a Khamenei associate last week that Bahrain was the 14th province of Iran. In a joint press conference, Bahrain's Foreign Minister announced that he accepted Muttaqi's explanation that the statement did not reflect Iran's official position. He also advised that the two countries agreed to hold a joint committee meeting on future cooperation (although this meeting had in fact been announced last month). Bahrain's leading Shia cleric made clear Shia loyalty to Bahrain in his Friday sermon, and the country's leading Shia journalist urged Bahrainis to forget the past and move forward, underscoring Bahraini Shia discomfort with the whole incident. For its part, the Bahrain government felt it had no choice, once it had made its point, to seek accommodation with its large and potentially threatening neighbor to the north. By June 16, the storm seemed to have subsided. End summary

12. (SBU) Iranian Foreign Minister Muttaqi visited Bahrain July 14 to try cool emotions and reassure Bahrainis following a controversial statement last week by Kayhan editor and Khamenei associate Hussain Shariatmadari reasserting a claim that Bahrain was rightfully the 14th province of Iran (ref A). Muttaqi seems to have been largely successful in his mission, as Bahrain's Foreign Minister Shaikh Khalid bin Ahmed told reporters at a joint press conference that he accepted Muttaqi's explanation that Shariatmadari's comments did not reflect the Iran government's official position.

13. (C) Shaikh Khalid told the Ambassador that in the meeting with Muttaqi he asked point blank if Iran fully respected the sovereignty of Bahrain. Muttaqi assured Shaikh Khalid that Iran did, as long as Bahrain fully respected Iran's sovereignty (perhaps a veiled reference to the presence of the U.S. Navy in Bahrain). Shaikh Khalid said that he accepted the Iranian statement, but added that "we still have a lot of work to do" in the relationship with Iran.

14. (U) During the press conference, Shaikh Khalid stated that Bahrain had received "official assurances" on the question of Bahrain's sovereignty, and that the two countries had agreed to set up a joint committee to develop areas of future cooperation, particularly in the oil and gas field, which will meet in the fall. (Comment: Actually, news of this committee is not new. It was announced last month during the visit of MFA Minister of State Nazar Al-Baharna to Tehran (ref B)). Shaikh Khalid also welcomed Iran's announcement that it had agreed to answer IAEA questions about its nuclear program.

15. (C) For his part, Muttaqi told the press that Iran recognizes Bahrain as an independent state and has no sovereignty claims towards it. He declined to apologize for Shariatmadari's comments, however, saying that if a story about Iran was published in the Bahraini newspapers, Iran would not ask the Bahrain government for an apology. MFA MinState Al-Baharna told the Ambassador that, in the meeting with Shaikh Khalid, Muttaqi stated that Iran had not reacted in protest whenever anti-Iranian Bahraini columnists criticized Iran, even when the columnist was a member of the King-appointed Shura Council. (Comment: Without naming names, Muttaqi clearly had in mind Akhbar Al-Kaleej columnist Sameera Rajab, who was appointed to the Shura Council last December and regularly writes critical columns about the United States and Iran.) In addition to his meeting with Shaikh Khalid and the press conference, Muttaqi also met with Crown Prince Shaikh Salman.

16. (U) Prior to the arrival of Muttaqi, news of Shariatmadari's statement continued to reverberate in Bahrain. A noisy demonstration took place outside the Iranian Embassy on July 13, with protesters chanting anti-Iranian slogans and demanding the closure of the Embassy and an official apology from the Iranian government. Major Shia political bloc Al-Wifaq was notable for its absence at the demonstration. Friday prayer sermons focused on Shariatmadari's statement. Most noteworthy was Shia spiritual leader Shaikh Isa Qassim's comment that the statement raised three issues: First, any agreement or disagreement between the Bahraini people and their government is strictly an internal affair, and it is unacceptable that any other government increase the tension; second, the statement was against the interests of everyone and worked

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against the stability that the region needs; and third, the statement was unrealistic because Bahrain is an independent country and no other country has sovereignty over it.

17. (U) In his July 15 editorial, editor of the Shia-oriented daily Al-Wasat, Mansour Al-Jamri, praised Muttaqi's statement to the press in Bahrain and urged Bahrainis to forget the past and encourage future development between the two countries. He welcomed the formation of a joint committee to develop areas of future cooperation.

18. (U) Bu June 16, the tempest created by the Shariatmadari seemed to have subsided. The story was off the front pages, except for one small article reporting that the Iranian MFA spokesman had reiterated in his weekly news conference that Shariatmadari's statement represented his personal view only and not that of the Iranian Foreign Ministry, and that Iran respects Bahraini sovereignty and will continue to have good relations with Bahrain. Also reported was a day trip Shaikh Khalid took to Saudi Arabia to brief King Abdullah on the affair.

18. (C) Comment: Muttaqi's visit has predictably quieted the local storm that developed over Shariatmadari's ill-timed statement. Nonetheless, the statement, in hitting a raw nerve, aroused the worst fears in Bahrain's Sunni community, especially among those inclined to distrust Iran in particular and Shia in general. The statements of the leading Shia cleric and Shia journalist are telling. Shaikh Isa Qassim wanted to make clear Shia loyalty to Bahrain, and Mansour Al-Jamry wanted to get the whole thing over with as quickly as possible. They saw no benefit in this for the Bahraini Shia. As for Bahrain's relations with Iran, the government predictably felt that, once it had made its point, it had no choice but to seek accommodation with its large and potentially threatening neighbor to the north.

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